

Lilith in Ancient Texts

Over the years, Lilith has graced us with appearances of varying degrees in several classic ancient texts. Here we will look through some of them and detail Lilith's characterizations in each of the texts.

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Gilgamesh and the Huluppu Tree

Lilith's first textual appearance happens in an ancient Sumerian epic named "Gilgamesh and the Huluppu Tree", which was written as a series of poems in clay tablets. Originally known as "Innana and the Huluppu Tree", this epic dates back to 2000 BCE Babylonia, where the Sumerians reigned supreme. The poems were written on several tablets and integrated into a larger poem. Some tablets still exist to this day and can be found written not only in Akkadian (the Semitic language that was spoken by the Babylonians) but also in Hurrian and Hittite. In "Gilgamesh and the Huluppu Tree", a devilish Lilith builds a house in the middle of the Huluppu Tree that had been planted near the Euphrates river in the days of the Creation. This tree happens to be in the garden of Innana, the Goddess of Erotic Love. Lilith is joined by a dragon who places his nest at the base of the tree and by a Zu-bird who places its young on the crown of the tree. The mighty hero Gilgamesh appears and slays the dragon with his huge bronze ax. Stricken with fear, Lilith tears down her house and flees to the desert.



"Gilgamesh and the Huluppu Tree clay tablet" by Osama Shukir Muhammad Amin.

The Book of Genesis

Perhaps Lilith's most controversial and discounted appearance in a religious text is her appearance in the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Thought to have been written by Moses in 1445 BCE (or 1290 BCE as **some dispute**) the Book of Genesis has two parts that have often been seen to counteract one another. While Genesis 2 contains the widely popular Adam and Eve story where God first makes Adam and then fashions Eve from Adam's rib so that Adam would not be lonely and have a helper, the shorter Genesis 1 clearly states that a male and a female were created by God in His own image at the same time and from the same earth. Genesis 1:27 states:

*"So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of god he created them;
male and female he created them."*

Genesis 1:27.

Although many have debated over these notably different creation stories, in Rabbinic and Jewish interpretations, these stories come chronologically. First came Lilith, Adam's first wife and equal made alongside him from the same Earth. Then came Eve, Adam's second wife, and the mother of humanity. Despite her name never being mentioned in the text itself, Lilith is widely considered to be Adam's first wife, and thus the world's first woman.

The Hebrew Bible

The Bible mentions Lilith only once, in Isaiah 34. The book of Isaiah contains a collection of short but deeply detailed Hebrew prophecies, with its first 39 chapters forming what has been called the "First Isaiah". Chapter 34 details Yahweh's (God's real name) day of vengeance wherein Yahweh fights with Edomites- strange outsider creatures. According to the prophecy, Edom will become a waste space full of wild animals and infertile land. Lilith is said to be here too. Isaiah 34:14 states,

*The wild-cat shall meet with the jackals
And the satyr shall cry to his fellow,
Yea, Lilith shall repose there
And find her a place of rest.*

Isaiah 34:14

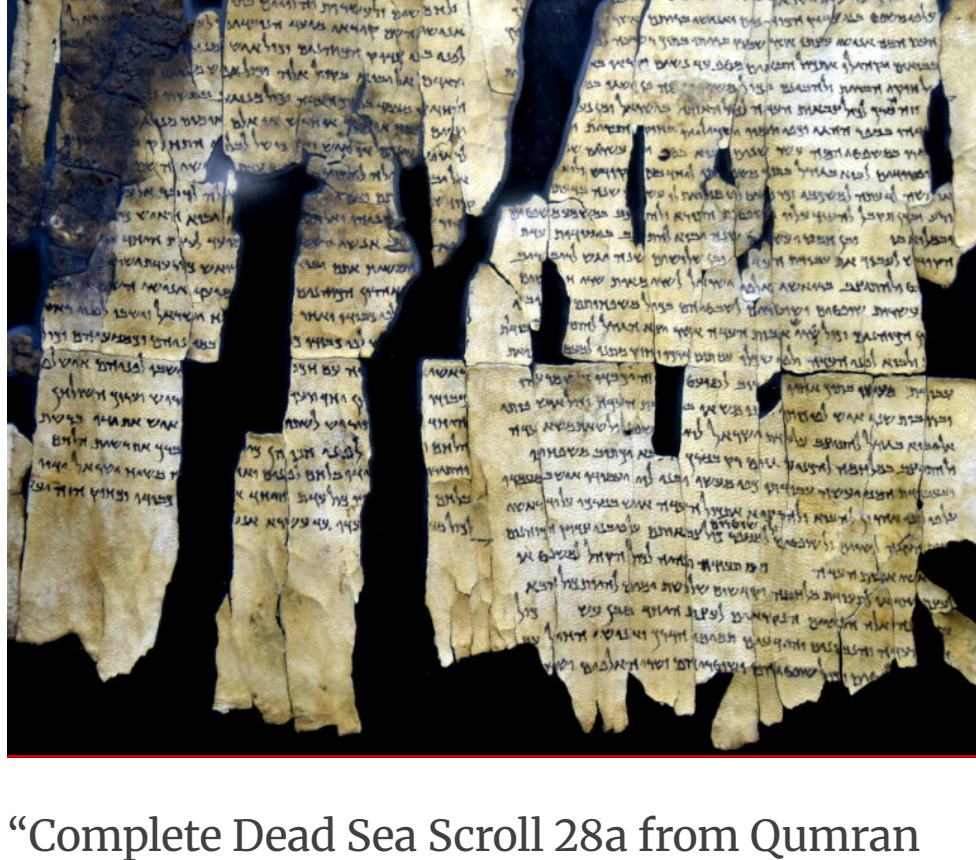
This lone mention of Lilith is never followed up, supposedly because Lilith the she-demon was so well-known that her mere name was enough to conjure up images of the horror when imagining this prophesized post-apocalyptic world.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

Lilith then appears in the Dead Sea Scrolls, a collection of ancient manuscripts that are approximately two thousand years old. Thought to be the greatest archaeological find of the 20th century, the Dead Sea Scrolls were first found by chance in 1947 in a cave near Khirbet Qumran on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. Now, fragments of almost 950 different scrolls have been found, consisting of copies of the Hebrew Bible, sectarian commentary on the Bible, and even some new texts that had not been known at all. The Qumran Sect was highly engrossed with demonology, and so it is no shock that Lilith appears in the "Song for a Sage", a hymn possibly used in exorcisms. The hymn goes,

*"And I, the Sage, sound the majesty of His beauty to terrify and
confound all the spirits of destroying angels and the bastard spirits, the
demons, Lilith. . . , and those that strike suddenly, to lead astray the
spirit of understanding, and to make desolate their heart."*

Song for a Sage, Dead Sea Scrolls.



"Complete Dead Sea Scroll 28a from Qumran Cave 1" by Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin, courtesy of the Jordan Museum in Amman.

To learn more about the Dead Sea Scrolls, watch:

The Babylonian Talmud

With her inclusion in the Babylonian Talmud, Lilith was officially brought into the scholarly world. Learned rabbis compiled and edited the Babylonian Talmud circa 500-600 CE, and it went on to become a central text of Rabbinic Judaism. The Talmud is a compilation of legal discussions, tales of great rabbis, and commentaries on Bible passages which have become a central source for Jewish religious law and theology.

In the Talmud, Lilith is mentioned sparsely in different contexts. Lilith is mentioned as the mother of the demon Hormin (b.Sanhedrin 39a) or Hormiz (b. Bava Batra 73b), establishing her in the Jewish scholarly world as the "Mother of Demons". Further mentions of Lilith in the Talmud state that she has long hair (b. Eruvin 100), she is winged (b. Niddah 24b), and attacks the lonely sleeper (b. Shabbat 151b). These characterizations of Lilith are thought to have been heavily based upon Babylonian demonology, with Lilith sharing traits with previous Babylonian demoneses the Ardat Lili (a lustful female who attacks single men), and Labratu (a female demon with wild hair that kills children and sucks their blood).

To learn more about the Babylonian Talmud, watch:

The Alphabet of Ben Sira

After millenniums of sparse appearances in ancient Jewish texts, Lilith's story is finally fleshed out in a 900 CE text named the Alphabet of Ben Sira. Often thought to be quite a sarcastic (and misogynistic) anonymous midrash, the Alphabet of Ben Sira is a piece of Jewish Aggadah (folklore) that portrays biblical stories in often satirical ways. Lilith is the star of the fifth episode of this 22 episode-long ancient text, and shockingly, is portrayed as Adam's first wife before Eve.

The Alphabet brings in Lilith's narrative within the tale of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (the greatest king of the Chaldean dynasty of Babylonia), and his young son who has fallen ill. The King commands Ben Sira, a courtier, to cure his son. Promptly after taking the name of God, Ben Sira settles in on the task at hand and inscribes an Amulet with the names of the three Angels of Health-Senoy, Sansenoy, and Semangelof. Ben Sira states that these angels travel around the world to control and destroy evil spirits such as Lilith who bring death and illness. Citing directly from Genesis, Ben Sira goes on to tell the story of how God thought that Adam would be lonely, so God fashioned a companion for him from the same soil. Soon the couple begins to fight, with neither listening to the other. Thinking of her as his egalitarian spouse, Lilith seeks not to be in a subordinate position during intercourse. Adam disagrees, thinking that the bottom is her rightful place. Furious, Lilith takes the Sacred Name (God's real name), and flies away, escaping to the Red Sea.

The Almighty sends the Three Angels of Health in search of Lilith and gives her an ultimatum- if Lilith fails to return, 100 of her children would die every day. The angels find Lilith near the Red Sea, and she refuses to go back, claiming that she was made to devour children in retaliation for Adam's mistreatment and God's commands to slay her children. To save herself from being drowned in the Red Sea by the three angels, Lilith promises no harm to any child who bears an amulet with either her name on it or the names of the three Angels of Health on it.

The Alphabet of Ben Sira goes into great detail about the kind of threat Lilith possesses, claiming that Lilith would only harm baby boys during the first eight days after their birth, until they are circumcised, and baby girls during the first twelve days of their life. These declarations must have impacted Jewish communities massively, for there are several customs during childbirth related to avoiding Lilith and her like. To ward off Lilith, amulets with her name were placed outside the entrances of the birth rooms, the house, and even on the bed. With these amulets, kosher mezuzot (parchment inscribed with specified Hebrew verses from the Torah) were also positioned in all entrances of the birth room. The birth rooms would be shut off and no one would be allowed to enter during birth. Salt or knives were also placed under the baby's mattress, and a red thread would be tied to the baby's wrist. The new mother would stay in bed for eight days, adorned with amulets, and female relatives of the woman would never leave the newborn baby unattended.



"Amulet for mother and newborn" by Ofrit Rosenberg, courtesy of Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

"Bind Lilith in Chains" reads this amulet. Lilith (center) is bound by chains. God's real name has been inscribed as well as some abbreviated lines from the Torah/Bible.

In expanding on her back story then, The Alphabet of Ben Sira solidified fear and hatred of Lilith in ancient Jewish communities and put the blame of all infant deaths of her, further villainizing and demonizing her.

The Book of Zohar

The Book of Zohar brings in another spin on the biblical tale of creation by incorporating Adam, Lilith, and Eve in the origin story. Thought to have been written around 1300 CE in Spain by Moses de Leon (1250-1305), the Book of Zohar serves as the foundational literature of Jewish mystical thought known as the Kabbalah. The reinterpretations provided by the Book of Zohar are taken to be sacred by Kabbalists (those who subscribe to this particular Jewish mysticism).

The Book of Zohar's reinterpretations in describing the origin of humankind is based on a reading of Genesis 1:27 where God created a male and a female in his own image. In this take on the Biblical tale, God created an androgenous figure who was half male and half female- a human. Centuries later, Zohar elaborates that God put Adam on a deep slumber and sawed off the female side of the human, dividing the "male" and the "female" into distinct humans. This detached portion was "the original Lilith, who was with him [Adam] and who conceived from him" (Zohar 34b). Later, Lilith sees her rival Eve clinging on to Adam and in a jealous rage, flies away.

In the Zohar too, Lilith's past characterization as a vicious succubus follows. Lilith grabs lone men and steals their seed to make demon children, leaving them infected with diseases. All nocturnal emissions reveal that Lilith has visited the man at night time. Zohar 19b reads:

She [Lilith] roams at night, and goes all about the world and makes sport with men and causes them to emit seed. In every place where a man sleeps alone in a house, she visits him and grabs him and attaches herself to him and has her desire from him, and bears from him. And she also afflicts him with sickness, and he knows it not, and all this takes place when the moon is on the wane..

Zohar 19b.

The Zohar often mentions Shekinah, the female side to God, and constructs Lilith as her antithesis. While Shekinah is Israel's mother, Lilith is its destruction. The Book of Zohar then lands another strike to Lilith, partnering her with the Samael or Asmodeus, the male personification of evil. In Zohar 23b and 55a, Lilith and Samael are said to form an unholy alliance and breed demon children. God later castrates Samael, and she turns to lone sleepers to steal their seed and impregnate herself. The Zohar's Lilith is Adam's first wife who has turned into a succubus that brings illness and death to all.

Lilith appears in many stories and forms in ancient texts, all of which have informed and constructed Lilith's image in ancient societies. Lilith has forever been immortalized in these texts.